
Fishing owls at Agenebode, Nigeria

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L'auteur présente des observations de la Chouette-pêcheuse de Bouvier *Scotopelia bouvieri* faites à Agenebode, Nigéria, en 1995 et juillet 1999. Les caractéristiques du plumage et les vocalisations des chouettes pêcheuses de cette localité indiquent qu'il s'agit bien de cette espèce et non de la Chouette-pêcheuse rousse *S. ussberi*. Il y a très peu de mentions antérieures de *S. bouvieri* au Nigéria.

Very few sightings of Vermiculated Fishing Owl *Scotopelia bouvieri* have been reported in Nigeria. Elgood³ mentioned four records, those near Lagos representing the most westerly ever, apart from a single taken by F X Stampfli in Liberia in 1885, and considered 'undoubted' by Bannerman² but questioned by Gatter¹. This is the only record west of the Togo-Bénin Gap.

In 1995, Phil Hall observed a fishing owl near a village on the banks of the Ogwe River, a tributary of the Niger, near Agenebode, Nigeria. Hall is an experienced and very knowledgeable observer, and noted that it was paler and more rufous than the published descriptions of Vermiculated, and was therefore possibly a Rufous Fishing Owl *Scotopelia ussberi*, which has not been recorded east of Accra⁵. He returned to the site several months later and discovered the remains of a fishing owl that had been eaten by a villager (P Hall pers comm). Some of the remains were sent to the Natural History Museum (Tring) for identification but no firm conclusions could be reached as to the identification.

An opportunity to visit this region arose in July 1999. The fishing owls are found along the Ogwe River, on a farm managed by the Leventis group of companies, at Weppa (06°57'N 06°35'E). Although the farm is no longer operated on a commercial basis, it is the home of an agricultural college established for local young farmers. People from the fishing villages cultivate some land near the river, but the farm is otherwise being allowed to revert to its original state of Guinea Savanna.

The Ogwe River floods during the rainy season and remains high for c6 months of the year. This results in areas along the river being unsuitable for cultivation and has ensured the preservation of the riverine forest where the fishing owls are found. The river is slow moving and meandering even during the rainy season, when it rises 6 m above its dry-season level and floods 100s of metres of adjoining forest. In this habitat, there is an abundance of low branches where the owls perch searching for prey. The local fishermen consider the fishing owls' favourite food to

be *Clarias* catfish (locally called flat-heads), which are extremely abundant in this area and have primitive lungs that force them to surface regularly for air (R Markham pers. comm.). On one occasion, I flushed a fishing owl while it was feeding and retrieved a sufficient part of the remains to identify it as a *Clarias*, while another was seen in flight with what was clearly a catfish in its talons. Along the c9 km of river that flow through the farm there is one lake and several backwaters and pools, which remain wet in the dry season, providing additional hunting grounds for the owls.

With the help of a local guide, I had 27 sightings of 8-9 owls in 25 days. Individual variation in plumage coloration was extremely noticeable. Some had heavy, dark markings on the upper breast and head, while others had less broad brown streaking. The upperparts, head and mantle also varied individually, from pale rufous to darker brown; and one was quite grey in appearance. However, all had the ground colour of the underparts off-white, while the bill was pale cream to yellow, as in Vermiculated Fishing Owl. In Rufous Fishing Owl the underparts have a pale rufous wash and the bill is darker in appearance¹. All had dark eyes and pale yellow legs and feet.

Recordings were also made of their calls. Only one recording of Rufous Fishing Owl is available for comparison, made by R Ranft of a female at London Zoo. At Agenebode two distinct calls were noted: a 'wail', which on one occasion was repeated for over 45 min with intervals ranging from 15 s at the start to over 70 s, before ceasing altogether, and, secondly, a 'hoot' that, on occasions, sounded like a duet. Some calls recorded at Agenebode are very similar to the Ranft recording, but most resembled those made by R Wilkinson, F Dowsett-Lemaire and J M Lernoold of Vermiculated Fishing Owl (all recordings deposited at the British Library National Sound Archive).

Researchers or birders wishing to study the fishing owls should contact Phil Hall in Lagos, e-mail: 110226.2654@compuserve.com or fax on: (234) 12691245. Comfortable guesthouse accommodation is available and visitors are made very welcome.



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Figure 1. Dark form of Vermiculated Fishing Owl *Scotopelia bouvieri*, Agenebode, Nigeria (A.P. Leventis)

Figure 2. More typical colour form of Vermiculated Fishing Owl *Scotopelia bouvieri*, Agenebode, Nigeria (A.P. Leventis)

Figure 3. Flooded forest, Agenebode, Nigeria, habitat of Vermiculated Fishing Owl *Scotopelia bouvieri* (Anthony Turk)